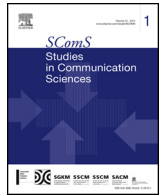




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Science journalists in Switzerland: Results from a survey on professional goals, working conditions, and current changes

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ABSTRACT

Science communication and science journalism are important in today's knowledge-based societies. However, little is known about science journalists, especially those in Switzerland. Therefore, this study investigates the professional situation and self-conception of Swiss science journalists. The results from a survey of 78 Swiss science journalists show that they resemble their international colleagues in regard to sociodemographic characteristics and professional self-conceptions. In comparison to their colleagues from other countries, Swiss science journalists work under privileged circumstances and, accordingly, are comparatively satisfied with their professional situation. Nevertheless, they also perceive changes indicative of an upcoming crisis of journalism.

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1. Introduction

Science journalism is crucial in modern societies. Increasingly more areas of life are being penetrated by scientific knowledge (Weingart, 2001, p. 18, 2002), which is, however, often not easily understandable for non-scientist audiences. Accordingly, accessible science communication is essential (Bubela et al., 2009; Fischhoff & Scheufele, 2013; Schäfer, Kristiansen, & Bonfadelli, 2015b).

Science journalism is an essential form of science communication. It still represents the primary source of people's knowledge about science, the way science works, and its findings and their implications (Höijer, 2011; Nelkin, 1995). This has been shown to hold true in many countries. In the US, television, daily newspapers, and online media make up 80% of the sources people consult for information about scientific topics (Science and Engineering Indicators, 2014). In Europe, 19% of the citizens regularly "read articles on science in newspapers, magazines, or on the Internet," and 40% do so occasionally. In Switzerland, those numbers are even higher, with 29% of the Swiss regularly reading about science in mass media and 42% doing so occasionally (European Commission, 2005, p. 23).

In contrast to their importance, however, little is known about the science journalists themselves. Few studies have analyzed science journalists, and those that did have focused on a few countries such as the US (e.g., Fahy & Nisbet, 2011), the UK (e.g., Williams & Clifford, 2009), and Germany (e.g., Meier & Feldmeier, 2005; cf. Schäfer, 2012). However, no studies as yet have assessed the situation in Switzerland. This paper aims to close this gap and, thus, investigates Swiss science journalists. This is not only important because science journalists are essential in presenting science to the broader public in Switzerland, but also because the field of science journalism is currently changing significantly. In many countries, science journalism has come under particular pressure in publishing houses, and science journalists' working conditions have worsened (Bauer, Howard, Romo Ramos, Massarani, & Amorim, 2013; Dunwoody, 2015).

2. Conceptual framework and research question

Science journalists' importance in the process of interpreting scientific information for public consumption does not mean that they can be seen as individual gatekeepers solely responsible for media portrayals of science. Instead, science journalists, as any journalists, are embedded in larger cultural and regulatory contexts as well as media organizations that provide resources, restrictions, organizational procedures, rituals, and tacit norms influencing how journalists select and present scientific issues (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Weischenberg, 1995). Any analysis of (science) journalists has to take these larger contexts as well as journalists' individual

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characteristics into account. It should consider, for example, journalists' media sectors and "beats" (McCluskey, 2008), their working conditions (Williams & Clifford, 2009) and their own understanding of the roles they think they should play—from "explainers of complex issues" to "information brokers" to "watchdogs" for science (Fahy & Nisbet, 2011), as well as their scientific expertise (Wilson, 2000) and their sociodemographic characteristics. This study employs such an integrative model. It understands science journalists as gatekeepers in science communication whose sociodemographic and professional characteristics are important in regard to what gets reported and how it is presented. At the same time, we acknowledge the importance of science journalists' organizational surroundings and analyze their assessment of the current and future situation of science journalism (Weischenberg, 2004).

2.1. Who are science journalists, and what is their professional self-conception?

Relatively little is known about science journalists compared to journalists with other beats (for overviews see Dunwoody, 2015; Schäfer, 2016). What is known, however, is that many media houses have relatively few science journalists (Schäfer, 2011). Only 4.5% of Swiss journalists work for a science desk (Keel, 2011, p. 145), approximately 1% of German journalists (Blöbaum, 2008), and similarly low percentages in the US (Weigold, 2001, p. 169) and in Norway (Eide & Ottosen, 1994). Science journalists have consistently been shown to be highly educated, predominantly male and, on average, around 40 years old (Bauer et al., 2013; Blöbaum, 2008; Hömberg, 1990). The proportion of those permanently employed as journalists is rather high in most countries (Bauer et al., 2013). However, in Germany and Canada, science journalists are more often freelancers compared to other journalists (Blöbaum, 2008; Hömberg, 1990; Saari, Gibson, & Osler, 1998). Science journalists mostly cover STEM disciplines (Bauer et al., 2013). Furthermore, their professional self-conceptions are somewhat different from those of other journalists. Science journalists more often say they intend to explain and communicate complex scientific issues instead of attracting large audiences or being watchdogs of science (Blöbaum, 2008). Given the homogeneity of these findings on science journalists' sociodemographics and professional attitudes across different countries, they can be expected to hold true in Switzerland as well.

Scholarship has many gaps, however, and of the reported results are outdated, especially considering the rapid changes in journalism, and in science journalism in particular (Dunwoody, 2015; Friedman, 2015). This lack of empirical data is particularly large regarding Swiss science journalists. Switzerland is a knowledge-based economy which strongly relies on research and development and consistently ranks as (one of) the most innovative country in the world (World Intellectual Property Organization, Cornell University, & INSEAD, 2016). At the same time, the country has a well-developed media system, with a diversified print media landscape and strong public service broadcasting (Künzler, 2013). Under these conditions, science journalism in Switzerland can be expected to exhibit a number of peculiarities in international comparison: Conditions for science journalism should be better than in other countries, and as a result, the professional satisfaction of Swiss journalists may be relatively high in relation to other contexts.

But studies focusing on Swiss science journalism have thus far focused only on media content, i.e., they have provided only content analyses. Schanne analyzed which science topics were present in Swiss print media in the 1980s, and how they were portrayed and evaluated (Schanne, 1986). Two decades later, Näf and Schanne (2006) analyzed the amount of science coverage, the dominant top-

ics, and the changes in science coverage over time. They showed that science coverage had grown from 1.8% of the total coverage in 1982 to 3.5% in 2005. They also demonstrated that the arts and social sciences made up just over a third (35%) of science coverage, with natural sciences and medicine together accounting for 30%, and that the latter had trended downwards since the 1980s (Näf & Schanne, 2006).

In addition, there have been several general surveys of Swiss journalists (Keel, 2011; Marr, 2001; Saxer & Schanne, 1981). While they do not focus on science journalists in particular, they provide contextual information about them. Keel showed, for example, that among 1,142 surveyed journalists, 4.5% were working at a science, health, or environment desk. This is a decrease in comparison to Saxer and Schanne's 1981 survey, which found 7.5% of science, health, and nature journalists in a sample of 524 (Keel, 2011, p. 145).

Detailed data on Swiss science journalists is lacking, however. Therefore, the present study aims, firstly, to describe Swiss science journalists in the tradition of journalism studies (Bauer et al., 2013; Meier & Feldmeier, 2005; Weischenberg, 2004). It focuses on science journalists' sociodemographic characteristics, their areas of work, their editorial positions, and their professional self-conceptions.

Research Question 1: Who are Swiss science journalists, and what does their professional self-conception look like?

2.2. What are the current changes in science journalism?

The study's *second aim* is to investigate how science journalists assess their current work situation, which developments they observe, and which implications they predict for the future of science journalism in Switzerland. These are relevant questions in light of current and far-reaching changes in (science) journalism. In recent years, scholars have predicted diagnosed a shift in the balance of power of science communication (Bauer, 2016; Dunwoody, 2015; Schäfer, Kristiansen, & Bonfadelli, 2015a). While scientific organizations' PR has expanded and professionalized, a weakening of science journalism has been observed. This is caused by the shrinking audiences of legacy media and, thus, their declining advertising revenue (Bauer et al., 2013), by online and social media sources that draw audiences and advertisers away (Brossard & Scheufele, 2013), and by legacy media coming under financial pressure (Friedman, 2015).

These trends are assumed to have particularly grave consequences for specialized desks like the science desks, which are comparatively expensive and attract small(er) audiences than other beats (e.g., Dunwoody, 2015). As a result, science desks in many countries have been cut back (Göpfert, 2007), and the circulation of popular science magazines and journals like *PM* or *Spectrum der Wissenschaft* has declined considerably since the beginning of the 21st century (Ruß-Mohl, 2012). Overall a trend of "cost-cutting, outsourcing, short-term contracting of freelancers, and ever-quicker production cycles" (Bauer & Gregory, 2007, p. 46) has been identified.

Under these conditions, it becomes more difficult for science journalism to keep up with the extension and professionalization of science PR and to devote enough resources to the selection, assessment, and critique of scientific topics and results. Therefore, some scholars fear that science journalism will adhere increasingly to a PR logic instead of a media logic (Bauer & Gregory, 2007; Bubela et al., 2009; Göpfert, 2007; Ruß-Mohl, 1999).

Signs of similar changes are observable in the Swiss media landscape and science journalism. The external communication of scientific institutions has expanded in recent years. A general media crisis (Puppis, Künzler, & Jaren, 2012) has led to financial cuts in media houses, and science desks have strongly been affected (Näf & Schanne, 2006), with newspaper like the "Basler Zeitung" closing

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